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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TAIPEI 000262

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/25/2018

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SUBJECT: MA YING-JEOU AND FRANK HSIEH HOLD THEIR OWN IN
FIRST PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

Classified By: AIT Director Stephen M. Young,
Reasons: 1.4 (b/c)

¶1. (C) Summary: KMT candidate Ma Ying-jeou and DPP candidate Frank Hsieh both held their own in the first of two media-sponsored presidential debates on February 24. The debate, which featured 20 questions known to the candidates in advance, was relatively low key, and neither candidate suffered significant damage. Leading in public opinion polls, Ma did not react strongly to sporadic attacks by Hsieh but focused on explaining his policy ideas. Hsieh was less successful in presenting his policies and was also unable to draw Ma into battle. Commentators here generally credit Ma with a better performance overall. A senior DPP official suggested needs to focus on explaining his policies in more depth in a series of upcoming policy presentation events (quasi-debates) sponsored by the Central Election Commission.
End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) An impressive 39-45 percent of the electorate watched the first of two media-sponsored presidential debates on Sunday afternoon, February 24, according to two media polls. The first and longest segment of the debate consisted of the candidates' responses to 20 selected questions selected from the public. The candidates, who were given the questions in advance, had just 90 seconds to respond to the question, followed by a 60-second response to a follow-on question. Local commentators faulted the large number of questions and compressed response times, plus the fact that the format did not test the candidates' ability to think on their feet, since their campaign teams had already had ample time to prepare responses to each question. Each candidate asked his opponent three different questions during the second segment of the debate. Brief concluding statements by the two candidates followed in the third and final debate segment.

¶3. (C) Given the format of prearranged questions and brief responses, most of this debate sounded low key and even scripted. While neither candidate came across as a compelling orator, both maintained their composure throughout, and neither suffered significant damage. DPP candidate Frank Hsieh, who did not appear fully prepared, often looked at his notecards and consistently ran out of time with the microphone fading out while he was trying to

wind up his responses. Ma Ying-jeou, on the other hand, seemed to have spent more time and effort prepping for the event as he controlled his time well and gave more detailed answers to explain his policies.

14. (SBU) While most of the 20 questions from the public were on domestic economic and social issues, one addressed the Taiwan identity issue. A Hong Kong-born mainlander, Ma Ying-jeou stressed that he is a Taiwanese, a citizen of the Republic of China (ROC); that his mainland policy is "no unification, no independence, no war;" and that he absolutely will not discuss the question of unification with the PRC during his term, if elected. Responding to a different question, on Taiwan's diplomacy, Ma emphasized that he would put the question of Taiwan's international space on the agenda of cross-Straits negotiations.

15. (C) Two campaign-related issues stood out during the debate: the question of Ma's green card, and the issue of KMT attacks on Hsieh over corruption in the Kaohsiung city government. Hsieh asked Ma whether he would be willing to apologize to society if he or his wife had possessed U.S. or Hong Kong citizenship or had continued to hold U.S. permanent resident status prior to January 27. Deflecting Hsieh's challenge, Ma said he had already answered the question last month, explaining that he and his wife did not have citizenship in another country and that they had both given up their U.S. permanent resident status twenty years ago.

16. (C) The only flashes of emotion during the debate occurred when Hsieh on two occasions took strong exception to Ma's efforts to tarnish him with responsibility for corruption. Ma tried to contrast his record as Taipei mayor with Hsieh's record in Kaohsiung, pointing out that a number

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of members of Hsieh's team had been indicted or convicted for corruption, whereas no member of his Taipei team had been indicted for corruption. An angry Hsieh asked how Ma, Taiwan's first presidential candidate to be indicted for corruption, could have the gall to make such a charge. Hsieh also accused the KMT of dirty politics by vilifying officials who had been acquitted or were still in the trial process in its negative ad campaign against Hsieh.

Reactions to Debate

17. (C) DPP Deputy Secretary General Tuan I-kang told AIT that both candidates had held their own in the debate. Ma delivered a solid "defensive" performance and avoided mistakes, which as the front-runner is all he needed to do for a successful performance. Hsieh, in comparison, went on the "offensive," attacking and challenging Ma in the hope of tripping him up. Tuan said a post-debate analysis conducted by the DPP and Hsieh's staff concluded that Hsieh had not prepared sufficiently for the debate, noting that Hsieh had not controlled his time well and that he had focused too heavily on attacking Ma without explaining his own position on issues. Tuan said as a result Hsieh missed an opportunity to present voters with a concise and coherent summary of his policy views. The Hsieh campaign now hopes he can rectify this lapse in three upcoming policy presentation fora (quasi-debates) organized by the Central Election Commission.

18. (SBU) Tunghai University Professor Wang Yeh-li told the media that the debate had served to consolidate support for the two candidates within their own camps. Hsieh, who took the offensive, was more eloquent, judging from his criticism of Ma's integrity, while Ma focused on winning support by emphasizing that he knew what the voters want. Few voters would change their voting decisions as a result of the debate, Wang predicted. According to KMT Legislative Yuan Caucus Secretary General Fei Hung-tai, Ma's performance was better because he was more friendly to the audience and also more comprehensive in introducing his policies.

Debate's Impact on Polling Numbers Marginal

19. (C) According to public opinion polls conducted by the media Sunday evening, the debate does not appear to have significantly affected support for either candidate. Overall, the polls gave Ma higher marks than Hsieh. Unsurprisingly, however, Ma's supporters credited him with a stronger performance, whereas Hsieh's supporters gave their candidate the edge. According to a poll by the pro-KMT United Daily News, Ma outscored Hsieh on policy content (55 vs. 19 percent) and poise (67 to 9 percent), while Hsieh won on debating skill (47 to 30 percent).

YOUNG